

Community Mobilization: Improving Reproductive Health Outcomes

Overview

Community mobilization, a key strategy for increasing demand for and use of health services, is a process that helps communities to identify their own needs and to respond to and address these needs. Gaining the participation of community members can help providers raise awareness both of health issues at the community level and of social and cultural issues that may promote or inhibit use of information and services, as well as improve clients' understanding of the methods or services being offered. Specific barriers to service access and use can be addressed and service utilization increased. For the ACQUIRE Project, community mobilization is important in linking health institutions and structures to communities, fostering greater access to and equity in health care.

Community mobilization promotes consideration of the needs of specific populations and localities. In particular, underserved populations, such as youth and men, can be reached more effectively through community mobilization. Mobilization also leads to greater sustainability, as communities are empowered and capable of addressing their own needs. A number of studies show a sense of ownership is crucial in building sustainability.

Knowledge and Developments

Community mobilization is defined as “a capacity-building process through which community individuals, groups, or organizations plan, carry out, and evaluate activities on a participatory and sustained basis to improve their health and other needs, either on their own initiative or stimulated by others.”¹

Communities lead or participate in all stages, from start to finish. With community mobilization, the role of the implementing agency shifts from a more traditional one of teacher/advisor/leader to that of facilitator. Agencies facilitating community mobilization should guide communities through a step-by-step process that includes: 1) a big-picture assessment of the community's issues, needs, and resources; 2) community exploration of issues and priority-setting; 3) community action planning; 4) implementation of community action plans; and 5) monitoring and evaluation of community mobilization.

Approaches such as participatory learning and action (PLA) can be used in the mobilization process. PLA is a community development approach whereby facilitators work with communities to help them analyze their needs, identify solutions, and develop and implement action plans. Participatory processes are used not just for assessment purposes but also for follow-on mobilization and action.

The ACQUIRE Project has successfully undertaken community mobilization interventions in several places. For example, in Nepal, ACQUIRE has a pilot project to improve the reproductive health of young married couples—an overlooked and underserved population—through participatory approaches that engage community members to support the reproductive needs of married adolescents. ACQUIRE's activities in Nepal include: having young married community members undertake outreach and peer education; increasing family and community support for married youth through information and education;

¹ Howard-Grabman, L., and Snetro, G. 2003. *How to mobilize communities for health and social change*. Baltimore, MD: Health Communication Partnership.

training health care providers in more positive and friendly service delivery for their young married clients; and establishing relationships with district health office and private providers.

In the Haute Guinea region of Guinea, ACQUIRE is addressing myths and concerns about the IUD through work with existing community health agents and community groups that have been organized around the issue. The village health committees (VHCs) are involved in participatory learning and action exercises and work with their communities to develop action plans for increasing the use of the IUD, as well as of other long-acting and permanent methods. Combining community mobilization and communications and marketing activities can be advantageous where there is significant misinformation or lack of understanding of particular services. To address these challenges, ACQUIRE has also designed and produced a media communications campaign promoting IUD and family planning services, which is being implemented in conjunction with the VHCs and community action plans.

Programmatic Considerations

Community mobilization activities should strengthen and develop referrals and linkages with services. It is important to meet increased demand with supply. The community mobilization process can raise expectations as well as create demand for health services; if facilities do not have the capacity to cope with demand, this can create discouragement and disenchantment. Gaining donor support and partnership in the process is critical. Projects have been able to balance community and donor needs by assuring that community mobilization goals and efforts are consistent with strategic objectives and are directed at achieving the same results as donors. In terms of demonstrating results, indicators for monitoring and evaluating community mobilization tend to be process-focused rather than impact-focused. Programs often face the challenge of demonstrating the value and results of community capacity building. Community mobilization and participation projects do not follow a “one size fits all” model—each scale-up area requires a local adaptation of processes and methods. Strategically linking community mobilization with marketing and promotion activities can have increased effect.

Takeaway Lessons or Recommendations

- Allow adequate time for the process.
- Define who participates and how.
- Recruit effective leaders, community representatives, and volunteers.
- Have skilled facilitators.
- Understand sociocultural context.
- Use culturally accepted methodologies.
- Develop community mobilization activities in the context of larger social reforms.
- Accommodate unanticipated consequences.
- Demonstrate mutual respect and nonhierarchical relationships.
- Where possible, work with established networks, drawing on existing local-level associations.
- To optimize mobilization, involve local service providers and community representatives in collecting information, analyzing information, and advocating the method or service.

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